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End-of-Life Projections

By Lola Lariscy

Swain finally finished setting up the camera. He was the only one in the conference room. The angle was perfect for capturing the audience around the table and the speaker in front. All the VP had told him that morning was to make sure the camera caught everyone. He'd only be able to get occasional facial shots of the audience members, but he'd have the speaker the whole time.

The company had never asked him to film a meeting before. It seemed strange. Even stranger was the number of meetings they

were holding: five in one day. Twenty people each. The whole company was going to pass through that day, and the company wanted him to film each meeting.

He'd never heard of a small company hiring its own full-time videographer, but there he was. He'd been at the company a month, and so far he'd just made training and safety videos. Lift with your knees; don't leave objects on the floor, etc.

The first group began filtering in. Some employees dragged their feet, some dragged cups of coffee, and some were so perky you'd think they were vying for a promotion, not going to a staff meeting.

He didn't start filming until everyone was settled. The vice president came in and walked toward the head of the table. The coffee-sippers, brown-nosers and hangovers all ceased their activity once he took his place.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I want the next hour to seem like any other hour at this company. I do not want any exclamations, no screams, and no indication of surprise at all. I don't want you to let a word about this slip to the rest of the company. They will come here today same as you."

The room was noticeably, uncomfortably quiet. The camera made a faint humming. To Swain it sounded as loud as a window AC unit.

The closed door to the conference room rattled. The VP anxiously looked toward the source, and then hurried to the door so he could open it before the entrant. Swain felt the executive's dread as he reached for the knob. He trained his lens on the opening door, but as he did, he heard exhaling breath from the people behind him. He didn't hear words, but he could hear hands tightening on armchairs. He snuck a look back and saw eyes widened. He sensed impending panic. He turned the camera briefly toward the reacting audience, but switched back in time to catch the gray figure as it rushed through the open door.

Swain was a relatively young filmmaker, but he'd studied color manipulation in college. He knew it was possible to drastically differentiate a figure from its surroundings. He could lighten, darken or rainbow-color part of a frame. He could make a figure look like it was radiating light. That was video, though. No one could do that with the naked eye.

His camera followed the person as he circled the table toward the front. Each person around the table also followed the figure. No one said a word.

Swain kept the camera trained on the man, but he rose up so that he could see him with his own eyes. His eyes told him what his brain couldn't quite believe. The man seemed cut out of

another reality. He was composed entirely of various tones of gray, and the gray even stretched out around him, mixing with the space around. It was hard to tell where his gray began and reality merged. His hair was black, his skin gray, eyes black and suit charcoal. Despite his dowdy appearance, he was smiling widely. The cameraman looked around the room. No one else was smiling.

The man spoke.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. As you all know I've been out sick for the last few days, but our vice president of Projects has been moving the train along. It seems like he's made more headway while I was gone than when I was here! You all know that our star project, the End-of-Life Projector, has been stalled while we waited for a test subject. It's been five long years. We believe that the technology is perfected, but we can't know for sure until someone passes from this life to the next while being monitored.

"It's an awkward subject, of course," he continued. The entire audience shuffled, with a few coughing and at least one man stifling sobs. "No one wants to tell anyone their research depends on someone dying. That's why we've had most of these meetings closed-door. Of course you all know what the project is about. We pride ourselves on transparency..." Another person laughed loudly, but then quickly lowered his head. The gray man

continued as if nothing had happened. "...but we haven't discussed the details much."

He cleared his throat, perhaps sensing the awkwardness. "Well, our VP came by my house personally to tell me he's found a workaround. I don't know how he's done it..." He beamed at the VP who was skulking in the corner, avoiding eye contact. "...but somehow he found a way to affirm the success of the test without anyone dying—he figured out how to do it pre-mortem, I suppose."

He looked toward the VP again and the VP nodded. The man, who Swain now recognized as the president of the company, took it as a sign to wrap it up. He made the cursory goodbyes and hurried out as quickly as he'd rushed in.

The silence was so heavy in the wake of the man's exit that Swain worried the room might buckle. He saw fear, panic and pain in each person's eyes. He wondered if his camera would pick that up. He wondered if the VP would really want this video shown.

After the shock settled, the uproar began. The twenty attendees all stood and began shouting at once. The vice president tried to keep control. He was sweating so much the cameraman thought he might have a stroke.

No one would settle down. A few people tried to run out, but the vice president stopped them. One woman walked calmly to a window and just stared out.

Swain struggled to remember the VP's name. Neither the VP nor the president had hired him. He'd never met them before that day. He wasn't even sure if he'd seen the president or just a hologram.

The VP--Evans, his name was Evans--slammed his hands down on the table. He was red-faced and visibly upset. It was hard for Swain to understand what he was saying above the crowd's angry shouting.

"Shut up! Stop yelling! Is it going to be like this for every meeting? Geez. We should have just rented a hall and had everyone at the same time." He paused. He got out his phone and texted something. "Okay, this is the way the rest of the day is going to look. You all are going to leave for the day. I am going to personally make sure you all leave, rather than going to the break rooms and telling everyone else what you saw." He glared at a few of the attendees. "Yes, Ed, I'm talking to you. I know you spend most of your time supposedly getting coffee. Gossiping is not going to get you a date."

Ed turned red himself and got up to leave. Evans got in his way. "No, Ed. You're staying right here until I say otherwise."

Evans turned to look at everyone else. "I understand everyone got an unpleasant surprise. I know that not everyone

knew the extent of our project. Still others didn't believe it, or just didn't understand it. Truth is we can capture someone's personality--someone's person--for up to twelve hours after they're deceased. As long as they're wearing a monitor, their thoughts and personality can be projected. You saw what it looked like--it's freaky, and it's kind of gray. We hope that once we condition people to accept this unreal circumstance, they'll get past the creep factor and be able to have meaningful conversations with those who otherwise would have been silent."

No one was talking at all by then. Everyone was just staring at Vice President Evans. Papers were scattered everywhere, and Swain could still hear muffled crying.

Mr. Evans continued, a little more quietly. "As most of you know, we have a monitor on my mother, and we had expected her to be the first test." He shrugged, looking as bewildered as the people in the room. "When Mr. Fugace didn't answer the phone, though, we realized that we might already have a test subject."

One of the attendees near Swain raised her hand. Evans acknowledged her. "I don't know quite how to say this." There were murmurs around the table encouraging her to continue. "If he's dead..." She paused for a few seconds. "...why did he seem so cheerful?"

He shrugged again, this time not even half-heartedly. “No one’s had the heart to tell him he’s dead. The whole purpose for these 12 hours of after-death is so that we can learn from the deceased. Do they see a light? What do they want their legacy to be? Where is their will hidden?” He stared out the window, his face shrouded with sadness and uncertainty. “We chickened out. The least we could do was let him have this announcement. We let him have these last few hours in front of his company.”

He nodded toward Swain. The cameraman ducked. He had really wanted to remain behind the camera. “You get your camera ready. We’re changing location. The rest of you...” He looked around the conference room. “...follow me to the parking lot. You are all leaving for the day.” He ushered them out, leaving Swain alone, once again, with his camera.

He got his camera packed up and headed down toward the lobby. He decided to have one smoke before he left. Who knew when he’d get a moment alone the rest of the day.

His favorite spot was on the 10th floor, halfway down the building. It was a large patio with several benches and a beautiful view of the city. He stepped out into the morning air. He saw the familiar skyline: the bank building with the name half removed (a victim of the recent bank mergers), the partially built hotel (a casualty of the recent economic

downfall) and the light rail system (still unused, despite high gas prices). What he didn't expect to see was the gray figure sitting on a bench, holding a gray cigarette. Swain wondered if he had died with cigarettes on him, and that's how he got the pack, or if he got the cigs post-mortem and anything real turned gray in his possession. He got his chance to find out.

"Oh, thank goodness someone else is here. There are usually at least a few people out here, but it sounds like Evans is shutting down the building. What's going on? Do you know?"

Swain wordlessly shook his head, easing himself down on a bench. He thought making noise would somehow disrupt, or disrespect the apparition in front of him. Was it an apparition? Was it real?

Whatever it was, it asked him for a lighter. "I've been out here since that meeting with no way to light my cigarette. Evans made me swear that I wouldn't leave this area. Who's the president—him or me? Anyways, do you have a light?"

Swain stared. He did have a light, but he didn't know if it would pass to the figure, or just fall with nothing tangible to receive it. The seam between him and the living world sparked as Swain handed him the red lighter. The man's name sparked in Swain's mind: Fugace. He watched as the red gradually

transformed to dark gray. Swain was surprised when Fugace could light his own cigarette.

He looked around for the projector, or whatever was allowing this man to manifest. He didn't see anything. He didn't have the slightest idea how this figure was able to appear solid, and more importantly, able to converse.

He decided to find out how much the man knew about his situation. "So, what day is it?" It sounded like a dumb thing to ask someone, but it was the most obvious way to find out if the man knew that time had passed.

Fugace took a few puffs of his cigarette. White smoke billowed out of his mouth. His lungs may not have worked any longer, but he didn't seem to know it. "Last thing I remember it was Monday and I was at home because I was having pains. I told Evans to run the show for me. I fell asleep before it was even dark. I woke up with Evans banging on the door."

That matched what Evans had said. It was Tuesday. Fugace hadn't answered his phone, so Evans had gone to his house and found him dead.

So what did Swain want to ask this man? He was probably one of the first people to talk to someone post-mortem. Should he ask him if he was cold? Should he ask him if he saw anyone else?

His grandparents? His dog that had died the year before?

He realized he didn't have the heart to tell this man that he was dead, either. He didn't even know the man, but no one wants to give news like that. What was he made of, anyway? Digital bytes? Light?

So instead he smoked a few cigarettes with him and asked some basic questions.

"How do you feel?"

Mr. Fugace contemplated this for a few moments. "Actually, I feel absolutely fine. I feel better than I've ever felt, certainly better than I did Friday when I went home. I was miserable. I had shooting pain all up and down my arms and I felt faint. I don't feel any of that anymore." He stretched his arms out a few times as if to show Swain that whatever was hindering him was gone.

"Mr. Fugace--"

"Bill," the gray man clarified.

"Bill. What did you expect from your life when you began it? What did you see happening?"

He smiled. "That is an odd question. But one I have an answer for! I expected exactly what I got: happiness,

fulfillment and a life well-lived. I did most of what I aimed to do. Oh, I never climbed Mount Everest, but the older I got the more I realized that wasn't what was really important. I got my wife, my children, my grandchildren. I started this business and I got what I wanted from it. Oh, I never got the means to re-animate the dead like I'd hoped, but old Evans said the projector works! The only thing I didn't get from life was regret, and that's the one thing I didn't want."

It was Swain's turn to smile. "Is your family going to be at this meeting?"

"Oh yes! Evans was so excited. He said they'd be here later. Except now I think he's moved it to the Civic Center or some such nonsense. I hope he calls my wife to let her know. You know she was on vacation with her sisters until today."

Swain was struck with this man's openness. He guessed being dead, even if he didn't know he was dead, meant he didn't need to hoard information.

"No, I didn't know," the camera man answered. "May I film just you?"

Fugace grinned. "Sure!"

Swain spent the next ten minutes filming the reflections of a deceased man. Later that evening, as the dead man truly

passed, fading from gray to transparent, he realized that the little bit he'd seen of this dead man's life was more inspiring than anything he'd heard before.

Swain got a title after that day: Videographer of the Soon Departed, or VidSDep, as his door plate read. He also got a monitor. He didn't know that was what it meant to be "invested" in a company. The down side of the job: always being reminded that his livelihood depended on his own eventual death.